



**Great Companions on This Journey:
A Round Table Conversation on Facilitation**

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Adam Borneman: Hi friends, this is Adam Borneman with the Ministry Collaborative, and I'm quite pleased to be with my colleagues today, Jennifer Maxell and Mark Ramsey, and also to have a many-time repeat guest, Elizabeth Lynn, who's always wonderful to have a conversation with us, especially today, because we want to talk about really what is becoming increasingly distinctive with the Ministry Collaborative, and that is the amount of attention we give to inviting and training our facilitators. And one of the reasons for that is that we think facilitation is actually key for all of ministry, and we try to encourage pastors to understand themselves as facilitators in their various roles.

So, I want to dig in that today with Elizabeth, who's sort of an expert on facilitation, and does a lot of work with us; but also with my colleagues, who see the ripple effects of this work in different congregations, and throughout our cohorts. So maybe, Elizabeth, we could start with you, and just share with us a little bit about your background in this work, and why you are so passionate about it.

Elizabeth Lynn: Sure, Adam. It's great to be on this podcast with you all today. Thank you for inviting me in. Many years ago, I was working in the nonprofit and philanthropic sector doing evaluation and consultation. And I was really struck by the fact that, while people are in meetings all the time, it is very hard to clear space for a deeper reflection on the values that bring us into the work and the questions we're asking. I think there has often been a fear that, if we talk about those things in a highly pluralistic setting – like a nonprofit board or a foundation staff room, that we might disagree, and there might be an argument that would be costly to the organization. So, there was, kind of, in the 1990s, an agreement to work on *how* we do the work, and not dig into *why* we do the work.

My facilitation approach grew out of a desire to create that space for reflection on the “why”. And we used readings of various kinds, often poetry, and brought people together around these complex objects to talk about how they read them, how they related to questions about their work. And it opened up space. So, I worked for a number of years with great colleagues around the country in the public humanities, but never stepped foot in a congregation as a facilitator, until I got to know the Ministry Collaborative. And this has been a different context for thinking about facilitation.

I've come to understand that, unlike other folks that we have trained to facilitate, pastors have particular understandings of what's expected of them in a setting. They often think that they're expected to provide an answer, a teaching, a lesson, or to provide – very appropriately, as well – care and support and compassion and companionship in some of the hardest and the most joyful moments in life. Facilitation of reflective conversation starts from the assumption you're not providing an answer, and you're also not caretaking specifically. So, it requires a different orientation to creating space and conversation.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: Elizabeth, I love that you bring that up, because when I first started thinking about this topic, one of the ways that I wanted to help orient pastors to the importance of facilitation is exactly what you said: it provides us an opportunity to be in community without having to have an answer, without having to be the expert, without having to be the one that is responsible (for lack of a better word) for whatever the thing is that we're reflecting on. And I think that's so important, because

a lot of times, when we are in communities – whether we're in our congregation specifically, or in just the community at large that we serve – we are always being called on to be kind of the head, the expert, the one leading the charge, in an authoritative type of way. So, what I love about facilitation in general, and some of the methods that you have introduced TMC to, is it really does give us grounding and footing and knowledge, not just in what to do and how to step back, but also how to keep the conversation going so it doesn't become this kind of like, "Okay, I'm not in charge; just pick somebody and expect them to kind of just run with it and have a good outcome."

So, I love the fact that we're having this conversation, because I think it really is one of those practical, essential elements that can really be helpful, if people can really lean into it.

Mark: Yeah. And Jennifer, that's really helpful, because I think what we all know, and I think what pastors particularly know, is: just being named a pastor, just being named a leader, just being named a facilitator, just being named a moderator doesn't make you good at the task. Just sitting in that chair...good for you, you're in the chair, but there needs to be a thoughtfulness and an intentionality to how we shape these conversations, especially these days when, if you say one thing wrong, the whole room blows up. We really need careful thought and preparation for this. And that's nobody's fault that they haven't had it. I can list, both in my own ministry, when I thought, "Oh, well, I'm supposed to do this so I'll do it." I had no idea what I was doing. Anybody who's going to sit in a place of needing to craft a group conversation has got to have equipping for it.

Jennifer: I think one of the challenges, Mark, to that for a lot of pastors is, for a lot of us, the closest thing we have to a facilitated environment was seminary and being in class. And so, a lot of times when we come into gatherings with our congregations and community members, that's how we approach it: "I have to be the teacher. I have to be the one that sits on high and disseminates this information, and then helps them work through it in a specific way." And that is not what facilitation is at all. Elizabeth, do you mind giving us a quick explanation or your definition that you use, or you like, for exactly what is facilitation, so we all know what we're talking about here?

Elizabeth: I'm not great at definitions of facilitation. I'm more into what it looks like in practice. I tend to think about what it is not. It is not delivering curriculum. It is not leading a support group that's focused on personal experience and sharing. At least, it's not these things exclusively. And it's also not a problem-solving session, a kind of fix-it session. And I think those three orientations are easy for all of us to gravitate toward, perhaps pastors, especially: "I'm going to teach it." "I'm going to hold it in a caring way." or "I'm going to fix it." And how do you facilitate a conversation that allows people to engage in those kinds of activities, and yet, at the same time, dig deeper into the true complexity of ministry leadership today?

In our trainings, and I know TMC also talks about this in many of its publications, we'll talk about the environment of ministry as one of complexity. So, something that exceeds any one answer, solution, teaching, approach, ambiguity, in that people will read it differently, they'll see it differently, and we need to create space for that. And velocity: it is constantly changing. So, facilitation is a practice that allows us to dig into the depth of that environment: not expecting to arrive at an answer for all time in a rapidly changing environment, not expecting everybody to agree in an ambiguous environment, and not expecting to arrive at a conclusion that will hold everything in a world in which our cup continually overflows with meaning.

Adam: One of the counterintuitive elements of this with many pastors that I've talked to around this is: even as it is a necessary way of navigating complexity, ambiguity, velocity, it is actually a very liberating way to do it. This actually unburdens you. The number of pastors I talk to in our trainings, but also just pastors throughout the week that I speak with realize, "Oh, so I don't have to write out this 20-page curriculum and then be an expert," or "I don't have to come up with a two-page plan on how to fix this problem," but instead: "I can come up with some good questions to help everybody else own this with me." The number of pastors that come out of our trainings who say, "Oh my gosh, I'm preaching next week. It's going to be very different than I planned." So, it applies from everything to preaching to small group discipleship ministry to leading a board. I think it really does free you up and, at the same time, helps you and the people that you're with engage with complexity in a much more fruitful way.

Elizabeth: I think that's great. The kind of facilitation that we help folks develop has many diverse uses. And yet, it is not for every setting. I had an interesting conversation with a pastor in the TMC network recently in which he said, "You know, there are times where I need to be a facilitator, and there are times where I need not to be a facilitator, like in particular meetings, in church council meetings, or committee meetings." And so, we began to tease that out and talk about it. And I think that's an interesting further dimension: where are there moments in pastoring a group where actually the pastor should not be the facilitator? And then, where are the moments where that really is ripe and right?

Mark: And each of those requires intentional forethought and purpose in what we do, not just walking in two minutes before the meeting, grabbing the file, plopping down and going, "Okay, why are we here?" It requires us to think through that. And, particularly in congregational settings, I think one of the most difficult challenges for pastors is to walk into a room when everyone knows you're the pastor.

So I think, Jennifer, as you said, "We're the expert"...But wow, the fruit that comes from not playing the expert, the fruit that can come from decentering yourself, still making sure the conversation flows, but not having it all come back to you.

We've talked a lot about in our trainings, and Elizabeth, you've helped us with this, it's sort of the "hub and spoke" thing. If a conversation is participant to leader, back to another participant back to leader, instead of around the circle, that's not helpful. But when it becomes one colleague talking another, talking to another, and the facilitator gently nudging it forward, or, sometimes, catching the stray sheep of conversation and getting it back corralled, that can be highly effective. But let's be honest about the pressure on pastors to perform. And I would argue that good facilitation is good performance, but it's not what people expect often.

Jennifer: Yeah. And I think that's important because I was just reading an article that was saying one of the main things that this next generation, Gen Z, is looking for, is connection. And I think facilitation is a wonderful way to help pastors become adept at connection, ways to help bodies of people connect with each other. And, to your point, Mark, a lot of times we are so busy connecting as the authority figure with the people that we are presenting or talking to, but we really don't give a lot of consideration to, "Okay, but how are we helping those that we are in community with to connect with each other?" And I think good facilitation helps with that.

I think also you bring up a great point, Elizabeth, about times when the pastor has to have different roles. And I think that also goes to different types of facilitation. Every type of facilitation isn't right for every situation. And I think that's why it's important for us to continue to learn different ways of facilitating different types of gatherings and engagements. One of the things I love about TMC is that we

have evolved quite a bit from, at least, when I came into the organization about six or seven years ago, in terms of not just *what* we do, but *how* we do it. Facilitation is one of those things that regularly we, as pastors, can just dip in and see, “Okay, what’s new? What’s different?” And also, “Based on my changing context, what do they need, and what are the techniques and the skills and the frameworks that can be useful as I try to lead authentically and well?”

Mark: Lest anyone think this is just sort of insider talk about how we do our work and our network: we are rapidly approaching, or have past the point of no return, where people are going to come to church for a meeting just because they have to come to church for a meeting. People want to go places where they’re going to grow – Jennifer, to use your word, where they’re going to “connect”. That requires excellent facilitation. Just because there’s a meeting set monthly at Tuesday at 7pm does not guarantee anybody’s attendance, let alone engagement. To me, every moment of people connecting around faith in whatever way has got to be seen as a precious drop of gold, and it has to be stewarded with just that amount of genuine appreciation.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Thank you for that sense of the preciousness of people’s time, Mark. That was what drew me into this work in the nonprofit sector so many years ago, was a sense of: people were meeting all the time, and yet they always felt like they had to organize a meeting apart in order to be reflective and to grow. And I thought, “Why not have these meetings, these regular staff or board meetings and community meetings become places where people have a sense of growth and new connection?”

And this takes me to a question I’ve been thinking about as we’ve been talking: How do we know when somebody is facilitating, instead of teaching or managing a group? It sort of goes back to your question about definitions, Jen. One way to ask what is facilitation is say, “How do you know when it’s happening?”

And I would say, “You know when it’s happening if the air in the room changes, and you have a sense that people are really thinking; that there is a quality of presence and thought that wasn’t there in the beginning, and that people are connected to one another in a way.” I wonder if you have other signs that some good facilitation is happening that you’d want to hold up.

Adam: I like that question, because I imagine there’s a number of different ways we could answer it, but they all kind of get at some of the same principles. I want to go back to something Mark said about the spokes on a wheel. Because for me, one of the criteria I use for deciding whether facilitation is happening is: where is the energy in the room? Is it still the person who’s supposedly in charge, or is it actually out in the room with the group in a way that’s hard to pin down, in a way where people are talking to each other?

And the second thing I would add to that is that: people are interacting in a way that’s expanding the conversation, not narrowing it. So, for me, I look at good facilitation as having the process and the energy out among the room, out among the people, in a way that’s expanding the conversation, expanding imagination, rather than narrowing it. There’s some elements of that that are maybe simplistic, but that’s, for me, a good filter for thinking about what’s happening.

Jennifer: The first two words I thought of when you asked the question, Elizabeth, were “engagement” and “alignment”. I think you know it’s happening when people are engaged in what is going on; half the room isn’t sitting there on their phone, or getting up getting coffee. But the other thing I think is alignment. And alignment is not agreement. It doesn’t mean that everybody is on the same page in

lockstep, but that everybody is on the journey together, and everybody is being a good companion on the journey in this session, or whatever it is that we're doing.

Elizabeth: Thank you. You all have been great companions on this journey. I would say that this was an expansive, engaged conversation in which I think I heard the sound of people thinking.

Adam: You know, we're covering a lot of different elements of leadership and facilitation that we picked up on over the last several years, and folks probably have more questions about how to actually implement some of these shifts. So, I do want to mention that we provide trainings; not just for our facilitators, but increasingly for other folks who just want to learn more about our methods for doing this work. And for anyone who's interested in participating in one of those trainings, please just reach out to any of our staff.